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Personal Tolerance Futile Amid Institutional Racism

RACISM, SAYS Webster's means a "belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others."

Few people in polite or liberal society will accept the epithet "racist." President Johnson and his associates, who have made unprecedented contributions to social reform, have rejected the Kerner Commission's condemnation of "white racism" as an oversimplified slogan. The report said:

Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it and white society condones it . . . White racism is essentially responsible . . .

Are my friends racists? No one I could call friend supports any doctrine of inherent superiority of one skin color over another. We pride ourselves on the objectivity with which we deal with others as individuals according to their own abilities, rather than any of the stereotypes of race or color. We are gratified at what appears to be the Nation's growing sophistication; most of our fellow citizens would deplore any overt discrimination based on color.

ONE REAL merit of teaching as a profession is the chance to learn from one's students. For help in understanding the Kerner report, I must give credit to a thoughtful paper by a group of Stanford undergraduates, "A Primer on Institutional Racism in American Society," issued by the Mid-Peninsula Christian Ministry.

The statistics of racial injustice are too sordid for us to want to see them again and again, and I will not repeat them in gory detail now. I know little about black suffering, less about its attendant humiliation and personal degradation, and this by reading of statistics in human terms, not by any real personal experience. Like most whites, I am sorry. I believe it is wrong. I do not personally discriminate as far as I am aware. Am I culpable.

Being willing to look aside makes me have to answer "yes." But this is no remarkable human failing. Being able to is the real sin; not a personal one, but an institutional one, derived from a system that whispers sporadic numbers about Negro mortality rates from disease and shouts banner headlines about riots and individual acts of violence.

The report of the 1967 President's Crime Commission indicates that well under 1000 (10 per cent) of the U.S. homicides in one year were assaults upon whites by Negroes, and of course only a handful of these were in racial riots. On the other hand, 60,000 Negroes died of disease in 1965 who statistically would have lived had they been white.

Who killed them? Which problem should be the focus of the public's and Congress's attention? Which is today

THE PRIMER restates what we all know, that we live in a system of institutions that rigidify and perpetuate historic wrongs while keeping the coloration of individual tolerance. What consolation is it to the Negro that only a minority of whites cast aspersions on his children while the rest point to their own intellectual progress in racial understanding: while the Negro is still systematically excluded from good housing, good education, good jobs; while the riots are exploited as excuses to turn our back on human needs?

We are cautioned not to "reward" rioters with reforms in response to violence. What could possibly be more racist than to incriminate 20 million people for the crimes of a few tens of thousands and to deny them what is justice, not charity. Or do we believe that one race does have the right to that domination of another which is the fact of American life today?

The responsibility for institutional racism is too heavy for any one individual to bear. There are no easy ways to change it. But the first step is honest awareness. As long as we tolerate white dominion, let us admit that we are white racists whatever the color of our skin, the profession of our tolerance or the Gemuetlichkeit of our commiseration.

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